



NOTES FROM NOHO

THINGS TO DO IN SEMILONG WHEN YOU'RE DEAD

By Martin Marprelate

Joe flashed a forced smile and called out: "All right?" but the woman's gaze was fixed firmly up the street. She was ignoring him with grim determination.

She would later describe this encounter to her doctor, recalling that one of the hostel teenagers had shouted out something at her on her way to the surgery. Probably drunk, the doctor said. Probably was, she would agree in a tone half of pity and half of contempt.

When he was a kid, smiling got Joe anything he wanted. He was a cute kid. He was cheeky, like his dad had been before he died. Joe hadn't quite got used to the fact that now he was an awkward six foot teenager his smile wasn't enough to get him out of trouble any more.

People expected him to be trouble just because he was big. They didn't give him a chance. He could tell from the way she blanked him that the woman on crutches was the same as the rest of them. Sometimes this kind of stuff made him angry but he was controlling it today. Today he was letting it go. He wished his caseworker could see things like this. He had his hand on the peeling front gate of the guest house, rotten close to weightlessness, when there was a shout.

"Oi, wanker."

The kid from the room next door to Joe's was down on the shop corner. He was wearing the same tracksuit he had been wearing every day since Joe arrived at the start of the week. His eyes slanted from side to side and his head was cowed, like he was waiting for it to be safe enough to stand up straight.

"Got any money?"

"You what?" Joe mooched over, pushing his hands into his pockets feeling nothing but his key. He tried to remember the kid's name. Izzy or Ozzy or something.

"Got any money on yer?" the kid hissed.

"What for?"

"Smokes... I'm gonna die if I don't get one - got any smokes? I forgot, ya don't do yer. Can ya lend us a tenner 'til next week?"

The kid wasn't looking at Joe, he was throwing glances down all three terraced streets that led away from the corner.

"What's your name again?" Joe asked, hoping the kid would get the hint that he didn't know him well enough to lend him money - not that he had any.

"Azzy, they call me Azzy," he said then paused and pointed "Joe innit, yeah."

"Yeah," Joe said propping himself with his back against the wall.

"Gotta get some smokes... got any cans?"

"Nah, it's too early for drinking man," Joe answered, looking away. He didn't want to drink tonight. He wanted one calm day at least but he couldn't face going back to his room just yet.

"Don't be a pussy, what else is there to do?"

"Dunno, nothing, same as everywhere else," Joe shrugged.

Later they were up at the Racecourse Park. Some kid had nicked a six pack of cider from Netto because some girl dared him for a blowjob. She was gone when he sprinted out the door and now he was giving them away, getting rid of the evidence as fast as he could.

"If I get done again I'll be banged up," he said grimly as he pressed the cool tin into Joe's palm.

"What a bitch man, she owes you some head," Azzy said as he popped the ring pull and gulped.

"Who are you?" the kid said, narrowing his eyes at Joe.

"Joe," said Joe.

"Dez," said the kid.

"Joe's all right, he's in the guest house with me," Azzy belched and gave a carefree laugh.

He jumped onto a swing which rattled violently as he struggled to stay upright.

A woman tottering in tight jeans and high heels took a step back from pushing a blonde girl on the next swing along.

"These swings aren't meant for you," she said. She meant it to sound firm but polite, instead it sounded meek but whiny.

"Yes they are, it's fuckin' public," Azzy snapped back indignantly.

Dez sighed and murmured onimously to Joe: "Here we go, he's a twat when he's pissed. Should have stopped him necking that can."

But the woman irritated Joe. She was bending over to lift the girl off the swing, saying: "Don't be frightened." The little girl had been fine until she said that. Now she was screwing her face up to cry. Azzy was spilling cider over his chin trying to drink while he was standing on the swing.

"I hope you're pleased with yourself, frightening a little girl," the woman grumbled.

Joe had only intended to lean on the swing frame for support but the woman looked up at him anxiously as he stepped forward.

"She wasn't bothered about him until you started on," Joe blurted at the woman as they made eye contact.

Azzy lectured her: "Why don't you fuck off if we're not good enough for you..."

"Don't you talk like that to me. You think you are such big men with your cans of drink. You're not - you are just rude, ignorant boys and I shall be reporting this to the police," the woman's voice was quivering as she began to lead the girl away.

"What are they going to do? I haven't done anything wrong. Bitch," Azzy scoffed sarcastically.

He leapt off the swing, flicking it in the woman's direction so it lurched with chains rattling to a taught snap. It missed her, straining for an instant against its bolts and then swung drunkenly back. She flinched and cowered but came out of it enraged. She couldn't find words and the frustration made her eyes well up suddenly.

The glint of her tears troubled Joe unexpectedly. What was she crying for? It was her who started having a go at them. His pang of shame curdled into bitterness almost immediately. She wasn't the only person who cried. He cried too but he cried alone, silently under his covers about real things like his dad being dead and his mum being gone and how the family he had left didn't want him. What must her life be like if she bursts into tears over a couple of lads having a drink? Not like his.

Now he hated her. It was that quick and simple.

"Go on, run and tell the police about all the serious crimes being committed up the park. Fuuuck off you stupid bitch," Joe growled, loud enough for her to hear.

"Don't worry I will," her wavering voice responded as she marched away, tugging the little girl along by her hand.

Azzy, Joe and Dez watched her stoop as the girl asked her something and then reply: "No we can't go on the slide."

The little girl finally started wailing.

"This is bollocks let's go," Dez said.

"Go where?" Azzy smacked his lips, energised by the confrontation.

"See if Hats is up the parade man. He owes me some money."

They moved off without saying another word under a sky marbled with layers of pale grey cloud. The woman with the little girl was home before they were halfway across the park. She told her husband he wouldn't believe the way she had just been spoken to. He mumbled a reply in front of the television as the woman gave their daughter a drink and put her to bed. By the time she had done that she didn't think it would be worth calling the police.

"What good would they do? Have a drink love," her husband soothed with his face caught in the digital glow.

"Who's gonna do it?" Azzy said, twirling on his heels with his hands deep in his pockets.

"You are man," Dez said, motionless but also hunched with pocketed hands.

"We should. We should. It's cash in hand. Bang, beer'n'chips. Easy money," Azzy chattered excitedly.

"You said you've done it before man, so you can do it now," Dez said.

Azzy continued twirling.

"It's cool, it's cool," he grinned.

Joe didn't want to be on the park any more. He had already tried to get away by complaining he was hungry. That had led to talk of getting chips on the parade and then getting money for chips on the parade. Dez didn't think Hats would have Azzy's money.

Dez then started picking out people they should rob, pointing out who was worth the trouble and who wasn't. Azzy had swallowed two ciders worth of attitude and was offering his own opinion. It was getting stupid.

"I'm heading back lads," Joe announced casually.

Suddenly Dez and Azzy were both in his face.

"Hey no, you owe us for those ciders," said Dez.

"You can't go now man. There's nothing back at the house. You gotta stay. You gotta stand there and look big. You don't have to do anything else," Azzy reasoned out the natural logic of the situation.

Joe sighed. A distant police siren wailed.

"You gonna do it then?" Dez put Azzy on the spot, eye to eye with a brief mischievous grin and looked around, adding: "We want a lad on his own..."

They looked in all directions.

"Where we gonna do it?" Azzy asked no-one in particular.

"We'll get someone on the way up. Look. Him," Dez said with a casual nod of his head.

Joe saw a lad about his own age in the shabby clothing of someone who could afford to choose how scruffy he looked. He had a canvas shoulder bag with a big flap. Two wires from a music player snaked up to his ears. Student probably.

Joe was a student on Tuesdays and Thursdays, retaking Maths and English. He felt out of place there. It was like going back to a cold meal he couldn't bring himself to eat when it was hot. The classroom wasn't the place for him and maybe this wasn't the place for the student. Joe turned away scanning the roads around the park for slow cruising police cars as the three of them ambled towards their prey.

"He'll claim on the insurance... he'll say we took a load of shit we didn't take... everybody wins, it's how it is," Dez was saying as he joined Joe's monitoring of the middle distance.

Azzy was quiet. The student was still heading for them on the pathway.

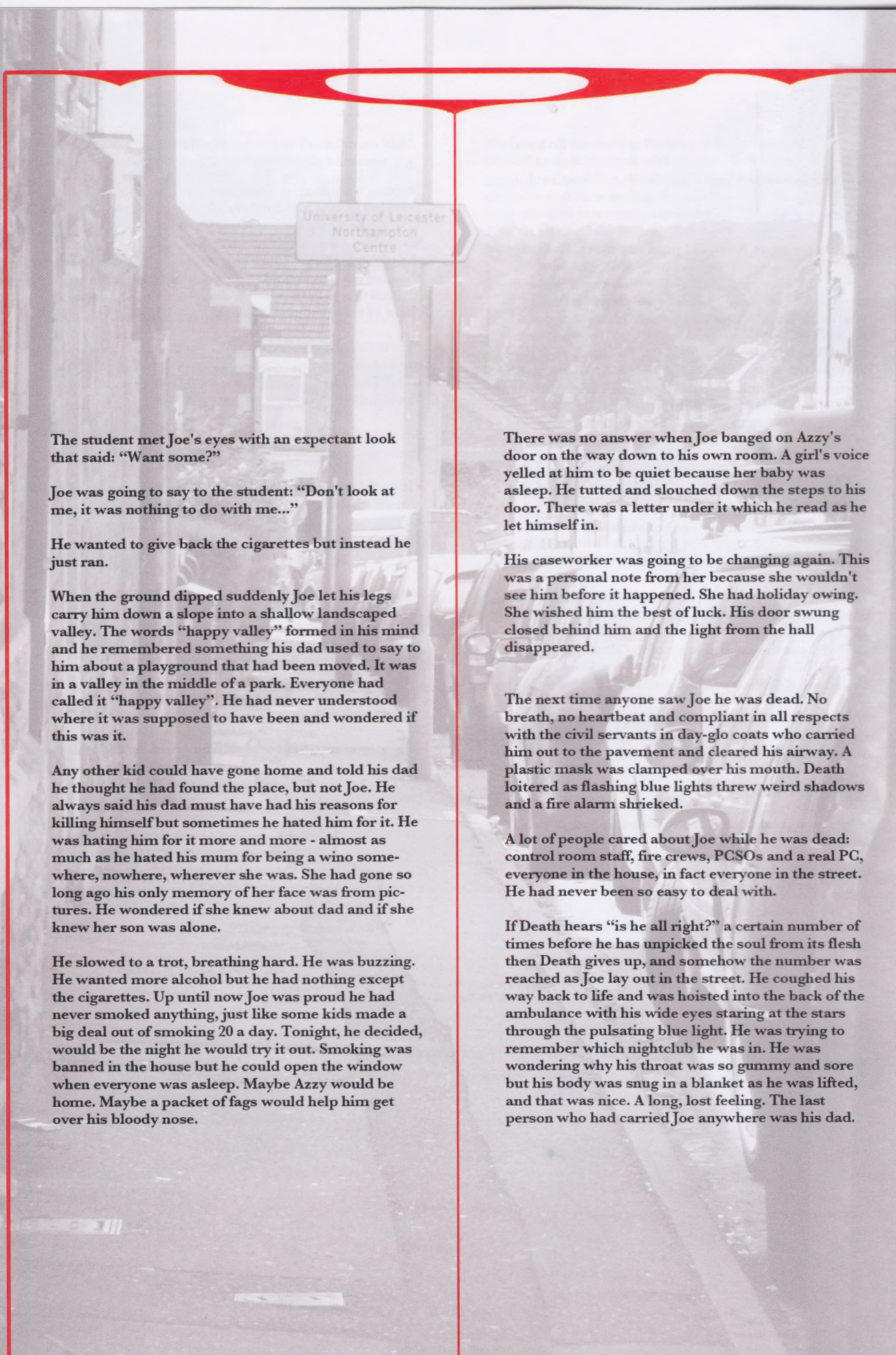
"It's cool man, coast is clear, but we fucking run like shit after yeah? I ain't stopping for no-one right?" Dez said.

"Yeah," Azzy said uncertainly.

Joe was running like shit. He loved it. Across the grass, through the twilight. He was running like it mattered. He kept pumping his thighs to escape the sound of the footfalls behind him, whoever it was. He didn't really care. He wanted to run.

It wasn't fear of being caught that drove him. He didn't think the student (some student, Karate bloody Kid more like) would be chasing them. Smashing Azzy's nose into a bloody pulp and then throwing Dez off his shoulders would be satisfaction enough for him. He had been faster, harder, nastier. He had won, no doubt about it.

Dez had pulled at the student's coat, dragging himself to his feet trying to have another go. There was arm flapping and the coat started coming off. Stuff fell out of the pockets and Joe had found himself picking up a packet of cigarettes with a lighter jammed in it. Then Dez was rolling and running like Azzy.



The student met Joe's eyes with an expectant look that said: "Want some?"

Joe was going to say to the student: "Don't look at me, it was nothing to do with me..."

He wanted to give back the cigarettes but instead he just ran.

When the ground dipped suddenly Joe let his legs carry him down a slope into a shallow landscaped valley. The words "happy valley" formed in his mind and he remembered something his dad used to say to him about a playground that had been moved. It was in a valley in the middle of a park. Everyone had called it "happy valley". He had never understood where it was supposed to have been and wondered if this was it.

Any other kid could have gone home and told his dad he thought he had found the place, but not Joe. He always said his dad must have had his reasons for killing himself but sometimes he hated him for it. He was hating him for it more and more - almost as much as he hated his mum for being a wino somewhere, nowhere, wherever she was. She had gone so long ago his only memory of her face was from pictures. He wondered if she knew about dad and if she knew her son was alone.

He slowed to a trot, breathing hard. He was buzzing. He wanted more alcohol but he had nothing except the cigarettes. Up until now Joe was proud he had never smoked anything, just like some kids made a big deal out of smoking 20 a day. Tonight, he decided, would be the night he would try it out. Smoking was banned in the house but he could open the window when everyone was asleep. Maybe Azzy would be home. Maybe a packet of fags would help him get over his bloody nose.

There was no answer when Joe banged on Azzy's door on the way down to his own room. A girl's voice yelled at him to be quiet because her baby was asleep. He tutted and slouched down the steps to his door. There was a letter under it which he read as he let himself in.

His caseworker was going to be changing again. This was a personal note from her because she wouldn't see him before it happened. She had holiday owing. She wished him the best of luck. His door swung closed behind him and the light from the hall disappeared.

The next time anyone saw Joe he was dead. No breath, no heartbeat and compliant in all respects with the civil servants in day-glo coats who carried him out to the pavement and cleared his airway. A plastic mask was clamped over his mouth. Death loitered as flashing blue lights threw weird shadows and a fire alarm shrieked.

A lot of people cared about Joe while he was dead: control room staff, fire crews, PCSOs and a real PC, everyone in the house, in fact everyone in the street. He had never been so easy to deal with.

If Death hears "is he all right?" a certain number of times before he has unpicked the soul from its flesh then Death gives up, and somehow the number was reached as Joe lay out in the street. He coughed his way back to life and was hoisted into the back of the ambulance with his wide eyes staring at the stars through the pulsating blue light. He was trying to remember which nightclub he was in. He was wondering why his throat was so gummy and sore but his body was snug in a blanket as he was lifted, and that was nice. A long, lost feeling. The last person who had carried Joe anywhere was his dad.

THE DESTRUCTOR

By Alan Moore



It sounds like a WWF wrestler, but it was a chimney. It stood in Bath Street, just down from the central walkway of the flats, until sometime during the 1930s. The Borough Waste Destructor. All Northampton's crap got carted down there for incineration and by day the sky was black from Grafton Street to Marefair. Gradually, the locals got the idea: this was where the town sent all its rubbish, all the trash it didn't want to smell or look at anymore. Including them.

The hulking chimneystack's long gone, its message still remains. The area is a dumping ground for human landfill, vulnerable people treated like busted appliances and tossed into a skip, shoved into places where you wouldn't want to bring up a hyena. Teenagers just out of care or at-risk families with no support from Social Services, who can't even provide clear guidelines saying when support is warranted. Or residents in sheltered housing with no idea who their carer might be from one difficult day to the next. Or damaged households scarred by crack mums, violence, sexual horror stories, kids excluded and abandoned by the education system who will next be heard from via a court case, or a headline where they're only known by their initial.

Stick them somewhere like St. Katherine's Court, with eighty grand thrown at it in a futile bid to reach minimum levels of acceptability, making it eligible for government housing bonuses that we are, frankly, never going to see. Put them somewhere like that, condemned by the Fire Services as unfit for safe habitation, right next to where the Great Fire broke out during the 1670s. Let their kids frolic in the used syringes and the human excrement that decorates the playground outside Berkley House with no surveillance camera in sight. People society has failed and that it doesn't want to deal with any more crammed in a place where they might very well go up in smoke, the way we used to deal with all our waste disposal problems in the old days.

From 2005 to 2008, the Council spent some £32.7 million on consultants, people who charge several hundred thousand pounds to make your letter headings more dynamic. Every Child Matters, says the government white paper with its five sensitive-sounding 'outcomes'. And for those that evidently don't matter, there's a sixth outcome.

Up the chimney. Into the Destructor.

Postscript: It was this article's rejection by the funding body behind our previous youth and community magazine, OVR2U, on the grounds that it was critical of the council, which led to the decision to publish DODGEM LOGIC. It should be added that the piece, with its revelation that St. Katherine's Court has been condemned by the fire services, was written some several weeks before the recent tower-block fire in Camberwell, South London, which claimed a number of children's lives. Residents claimed that there were no fire doors or fire escapes, which sounds very like the circumstances at St. Katherine's Court, and there were calls for an inquiry at the time on the basis that dozens of identical tower-blocks were erected across Britain in the 1960s, all designed with a central stairwell that, in a fire, acts like a chimney flue: the flames are going up just as the people are trying to get down. Then the police announced that the cause of the blaze was faulty electrical wiring (as if that was relevant), and since then nothing has been heard of the matter, leaving scores of potential Destructors scattered across the country.



LOCAL MUSIC REVIEWS

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Photography by
James Thorpe

DANNY CONNORS & THE LADDERS

Hurricane Danny Connors blows in more than one direction. There's a lot of stuff twirling about in there. It takes just a few minutes in his company to define the finer points of Steve Winwood & Traffic's rural work ethic, what God might be, & chicken soup.

'Soul', & 'Positive'. These words crop up a lot in conversation with Danny. Usually attached to either 'Music' or 'Thinkin'', any which way you choose to put them together works for where things come from, where they are, and where he's going. "If you believe good things will happen, then they will. New bands get chewed up & spat out, sure, but it's a cliché of the music biz to say that now. Why did Ray Charles never get spat out? It's up to you to not get chewed. And so what if you do? Believe in yourself, carry on... If you get dropped you have to have the balls to start again from the bottom up. Get in the van. Get out there."

Earlier days pin-balling between Newport, Northampton, Liverpool & London, scuppering three record contracts & a publishing deal; Roaring through various styles, scenes, bands, and some mainstream media attention with Northampton's pop-art punks The On-Offs, have left him with sturdy perspective. "I can't blame anyone else for record company problems I've had. I was a nightmare. Always choppin' & changin' - 'nah, I'm doin' Beefheart this week, Rap next week, Jungle this week." Sometimes just to be awkward. I was an angry young man, or more realistically, a scared little boy. That's why it never went anywhere." But things can turn around quickly, as fast as a flip of a coin, or the turn of a heel.

November 2008: former On-Off's band-mate Andy Crofts, now in Paul Weller's band, somehow swindled a nice short notice offer, and a hastily rehearsed 'Ladders' played their first gig warming up 4000 Weller fans at Wolverhampton Civic Hall.

Now living, practicing, & recording at The Lodge studios on Abington Square, Danny has tutored & harnessed The Ladders into a solid touring unit over the last year, in his words now a "great band of lads, a bunch of little sods. The great thing about starting a band in Northampton is your location. We're right in the middle of the country. From here, you're always halfway to anywhere. "Get in the van, get on the M1, get gone". An EP done and sold online or off the back of the van at gigs, a momentum is building, a sound is sought; an earthy raw mix of blue-eyed soul and rhythm & blues, with the emphasis on rhythm. Sly Stone, Ronnie Lane, Spencer Davis, these are the blueprints, but any accusations of retropection are given scowled short shrift. "I don't understand how we can be called retro. What isn't retro? There's nothing new, just new ways of doing it. I'm not knocking them, but all the bands now- Kaiser Chiefs, Killers, whoever, are all carbon copies of 80's stuff like Gang of Four, that's 30 years old now." We're now a few pints down for the sakes of this article, and clarity takes hold when questioned on immediate future plans. "Discipline myself, because if you're not careful, gigging turns into party-time all the time. I'd love for us to get out in the sticks with just the music. Get away from the fuckin' internet for a start. Those first batch of songs, that we play now, are sort of derivative of other things, and I want to strip that away & build something fresh. I'm in no rush, I know it will move on organically. I can't deny my instinct, and I feel good things are coming."



Liam Dullaghan-Making History

Having gone through the mill once with almost-made-it's The Havenots, Liam is now ready to take on the world again. Kicking up a country-rock dust-storm on 'Fucked Without You'. 'Choirs Of Angels' is a shuffling whisper of a pop song about falling in love with a girl from Desborough. 'Rotten Apples' or 'Leaves On The Line' are songs for wandering lost at night, lighting a cigarette & sighing, arguing with the ghost of a Jim Beam bottle, or in less romantic terms: sad-sack tales of the inwardly bound loser. He does sadness so well, I think he might actually be enjoying it. I am.

www.myspace.com/liamdullaghan

The Mobbs-Erect...But Powerless!

The Mobbs are as keen as mustard gas. Like three shell-shocked WW1 Privates stomping into no-man's land with ale-foamy moustaches, looking for a kickabout, whistling along to the mortar fire like punk rock had already been invented. They name themselves after shootown legend Edgar Mobbs, a man with bollocks the size of demolition balls. I think they might have trench foot.

www.myspace.com/themobbsmyspace

The Parks Dept

The Weekend Starts Round Here EP

Starting as the lone Luke Farmer with a keyboard and a sequencer two years ago, this thing is now a growing 6-headed beast, eating up stages up & down the M1. Looking like paint-splattered roadkill they go, banging cowbells relentlessly, boom bip-bip & chug go the Casio's & guitars. Then they may do a cover of Johnny Cash's Folsom Prison Blues if they feel it fit. Be young, be foolish, be angry...then dance.

www.myspace.com/theparksdept

Joel Harries-Broadcasts

There are few bands active in Northampton right now that don't involve Joel in some way, and the reason for this must be noted-He's a very talented boy. His first furrow out on his own, 'Broadcasts', is a collection of melodies as ornate & fragile as cut crystal. To pin him down under the folksier end of that dirty journo short-cut 'Americana' would be plausible, but a little lazy. 'Armed To The Teeth' or 'Broadcast' have an immediacy most other solo acoustic performers could only hope to hint at in their sleep when they dream of Elliott Smith or Nick Drake. This CD is only currently available from the man himself at shows, so get yourself a double treat.

www.myspace.com/joelharriesmusic

BEYOND THE NORM

As tenacious and as unpredictable as a junkyard dog, veteran activist and troublemaker Norman Adams spills the alphabet spaghetti on the unsuccessful persecution of courageous local lawyer and outstanding human rights campaigner Yvonne Hossack in the first of his regular shit-kicking columns.

We need the likes of John Pilger and Paul Foot. What has happened to the British (Okay, Pilger was Australian) investigative journalist? Who is holding local politicians to account?

If you read only the local press, you'd think that this year's most significant political event was council leader Tony Woods bending the regulations over how he parked his car. This one has run for months as 'Astragate', and it's a smokescreen. Get some BALLS, you journalists. Start digging.

The real story that could have used coverage was the appalling treatment of campaigning Kettering solicitor, Ms. Yvonne Hossack. She had mounted an effective legal protest on behalf of elderly and infirm residents of sheltered housing...many of whom had only gone into such accommodation on the understanding that there'd be a live-in warden to take care of them...as a reaction to the news that wardens were to be withdrawn by councils anxious to cut public spending and, as usual, targeting those sections of society that are already the most vulnerable and least able to defend themselves. For having the temerity to stand up for the old and cheated, she was vilified by councils from Northamptonshire to Hull. As a result of this she then had charges (of, ridiculously, bringing her profession into disrepute) brought against her by the Solicitors' Regulation Authority.

This disproportionately heavy-handed action could have ended the career of Yvonne Hossack, former Private Eye woman of the year, with her struck off and facing court costs that would probably have ruined her. This would, conveniently, have silenced an outspoken champion of human rights at a time when our leaders, for economic reasons, are keen to sweep those rights under the carpet. It would have removed a long-standing thorn from the establishment's side and let a lot of local councils off the hook regarding all those legal actions that are in the pipeline...

On September 4th, Yvonne served papers upon Barnet Council, challenging their plans to take away the live-in wardens from some of their sheltered housing schemes. Barnet was just the first of many councils to be taken on as part of her initial test case, with Hackney, Devon, Bradford and another forty or so also in her sights.

By this point, with the struggle for her clients' rights beginning to turn ugly and with the aggressive legal charges hanging over her, the embattled solicitor had received a torrent of public support, much of it from the elderly, often disabled people she'd been fighting for. Rallies were held on her behalf and on August 24th, BBC One broadcast the Panorama: Gimme Shelter special (still available upon the channel's website and well worth a viewing), underlining Yvonne's cause and interviewing her supporters, who included the inspiring Fred O'Donnell.

Fred, an 89-year old Northampton sheltered housing resident, was one of many who took to the streets in protest at the council's efforts to remove the live-in wardens from his housing scheme. Fred had grown up in Paddington and joined the army just before the start of World War II. He'd been a prisoner of the Japanese and lived through having the prisoner transportation he was on sunk by torpedoes. Him and his late wife Daisy, who suffered from Alzheimer's, moved into a sheltered housing bungalow when Daisy's symptoms became too severe for the nearly-blind Fred to handle on his own. Having a residential warden was invaluable, especially after Daisy passed away and Fred needed a helping hand nearby to read his correspondence for him or make phone calls upon his behalf.

Needless to say, when the decision was made to replace the live-in warden with a team of 'floating' wardens who would cover up to six whole housing complexes with a mix of visits and new monitoring technology, neither Fred nor any of his fellow tenants were consulted. Worried about increased insecurity that would come with the changes; angered by the broken promises and sheer unfairness of the cuts, Fred and the other aggrieved residents mounted their public protest in town centre, with the older demonstrators and their walking-sticks in the front line again, some sixty years after the last time they'd been in a battle for their wellbeing and way of life.

Fred's generation, and especially ex-servicemen like Fred, never much cared for protest marches and, a few decades ago, would probably have looked upon such things with disapproval. It's an indicator of the desperate times we're going through that even our old soldiers are now marching to protest at all of the things they fought for being taken from them. As Fred said himself, "It's the first time I've really ever got my teeth into something like this. I've never, ever kicked up a fuss until this."

Despite the fact that many people clearly thought of Yvonne Hossack as a more-than-usually admirable solicitor, the charges of bringing her whole profession into public disrepute were still trundling onwards. Councils she had angered and embarrassed by obstructing their cost-cutting plans were seemingly determined to both punish her and silence her for good, with the witch-hunt they'd mounted looking likely to see her removed from the solicitor's roll. She was called to London for the disciplinary hearing where she faced the accusation of professional misconduct, with a long and harrowing wait for the verdict on September 18th, during which she feared she might lose everything...most importantly, the ability to defend and protect the thousands of vulnerable people who depended on her.



But the testimonials that flooded in from clients and their families were overwhelming. Eugene Hyde of Staffordshire came forward to tell the tribunal how he had attempted suicide because his residential home faced closure. An accountant, Andrew Norman, confined to a wheelchair by muscular dystrophy, said that Ms. Hossack's tireless struggle to get proper care for him had helped to save his life. As Chris Kinsey who lives with a disabled daughter in Ringstead in Kettering astutely pointed out, "I think it would be so convenient for future cuts if they silenced Yvonne Hossack."

Along with the protests of Ms. Hossack's loyal clients, many of whom gathered outside the tribunal wearing T-shirts with the motto "I love my solicitor", there were influential voices weighing into the debate on Yvonne's side. A spokesperson for Age Concern spoke of the principles that she had fought for as "incredibly important", and Home Secretary Alan Johnson (who gave evidence on her behalf) e-mailed her to congratulate her on a "brilliant job for the constituents under difficult circumstances" and promised her a double gin and tonic in the Hose of Commons Strangers' Bar. Those of her supporters who weren't down in London waiting nervously for the tribunal's verdict were, like me, crouched by their telephones all day last Friday waiting for the news, all hoping for the best but, in all honesty, expecting the worst.

The charges of professional misconduct, contrived by a bunch of bullying councils who were angry with her for entirely different reasons, focussed mainly upon the solicitor's sometimes unorthodox approach to getting justice for her clients. Yet, as she said herself in her defence, "If somebody was falling off a cliff, and they were blind and deaf, I would ignore the rule that says 'Keep off the grass' in trying to grab them back." Sir Anthony Grabham, former president and chairman of the British Medical Association, told in a read-out statement how Ms. Hossack had helped win concessions from our County Council when it reduced care services for a variety of mentally or physically disabled people that included Sir Anthony's daughter, who's afflicted by Down's syndrome. In Yvonne's defence he said "Her work is of enormous value and indeed is essential in a caring society. This tough butterfly should not be crushed."

Then, on Saturday, September 19th, came the picture and the headline on the front page of The Independent that announced Ms. Hossack's victory, with the tribunal judge having dismissed all of the serious charges that were brought against her. Everyone connected with the fight to clear her breathed a huge sigh of relief along, I'm sure, with Yvonne herself. As for me, although I'd been planning a much angrier article in anticipation of a less appealing verdict, I'm as pleased as anybody that this column and this whole affair have had, for once, a just and happy ending.

Even so, the lessons we should take away from Yvonne Hossack's persecution is that our authorities, rather than, say, capping bonuses for obscenely rich bankers and executives, are determined to claw their way out of the economic hole they've dug by penalising those among us who are most at risk and who can least afford it. With the long winter of reductions in our basic services that our leaders are promising, as if expensive foreign wars and costly nuclear missiles are exempt from spending cuts but looking after ordinary people isn't, we should be prepared for government and local councils to start fighting very dirty. We should also be prepared to stand up and be counted, just like Fred O'Donnell, when the genuinely worthy people like Ms. Hossack who are trying to protect our rights put themselves in the firing line on our behalf.

There. Now, wasn't that more interesting and important than whether our council leader falsely claimed to have his bloody Astra registered off-road or not?

